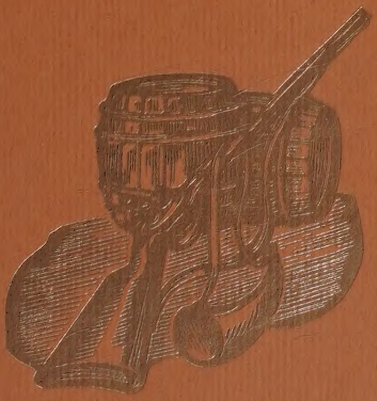
How George Washington Got His Gunpowder



HOW GEORGE WASHINGTON GOT HIS GUNPOWDER

For eleven months—April 1775 to March 1776—the Continental Army could hardly have fired back if fired upon. General Washington concealed the truth while frantically scrounging for powder to get him out of his predicament. Then the war materiel, the guns and the gunpowder, poured in thanks in great measure to the gun-running network which Benjamin Franklin conceived in cooperation with France, Holland and Spain. Together with, of course, American patriots and ship owners and daring ship captains.

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How George Washington Got His Gunpowder

Based on an article by Harvey Ardman
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FOREWORD

In the chapter titled "Three Patriots" of his fascinating novel *Chesapeake*, author James A. Michener tells of the devious hand Benjamin Franklin played in the gunpowder game that would in 1775 help George Washington's Continental Army succeed in its siege of Boston, stronghold of the British Red Coats.

Franklin, while in France, had developed a network of influential acquaintances in Holland, Spain and France—particularly with the French playwright—and spy—Beaumarchais.

In *Chesapeake*, Simon Steed is the American shipowner and patriot who, experiencing little success in his attempts to procure arms and ammunition from various French sources, receives unexpected assistance from Franklin. Author Michener's description of that phase of the fabulous Ambassador's efforts in behalf of the Colonies draws upon actual history as conceived and fulfilled by Franklin's skills in planning and communicating.

The paragraphs that follow are excerpted from *Chesapeake* because the story line as presented in the episode, "Three Patriots," draws upon the same historic resource as did the writer of "How George Washington Got His Gunpowder."

This blending of fact and fiction, provides interesting reading for devotees of Franklin's years as Ambassador to France.

Benjamin Franklin, chief advocate in France for the colonies, came down to Nantes to meet with the leaders of that city and Lorient and La Rochelle. The Montaudoins placed at his disposal a small château, in which he held court, and there Steed met him.

Franklin was well past seventy, bald, paunchy, squint-eyed, and as lively as a chestnut on a griddle. He affected a costume that was aggressively American, including a coonskin hat and a gnarled cherry-wood cane. He spoke abominable French with a vigor that made his pronouncements sound fresh and challenging. At the big dinners he gave he rejected sentimentality and never spoke of America's valiant struggle; he appealed always to the fundamental interests of France, and the more mundane he made them the better.

'We're doing your dirty work, and all we seek is tangible support. We seek the privilege of trading freely with your port cities, with profits for you. We want to establish in the New World a counterbalance to the Old, and this will be of advantage primarily to you.'

He was an amazing man. He had brought down from Paris a mysterious woman introduced merely as Madame de Segonzac; her identity and her relationship to Franklin were not explained, but Franklin paid her deference and relied on her to persuade his guests. He also delighted in walking through the streets of Nantes and visiting those shopkeepers who had imported for the occasion the remarkable mementos then flooding Paris: teacups with Franklin's portrait set in por-

celain; snuffboxes decorated with enameled coonskin caps; silken pillows with embroidered portraits; and broadsides containing his bespectacled countenance and quotations from *Poor Richard.* It was these homely, pragmatic aphorisms which endeared this uncouth American to the French; in his barbarous way he spoke their language. But nothing he accomplished in Nantes surpassed his performance one afternoon when he was strolling along a crowded street near the wharf. There an enterprising merchant from Corsica had imported three of the large china chamber pots containing on their sides portraits of Franklin, and on their insides glazed representations of the coonskin cap. Hundreds had been sold throughout France, but these were the first in Nantes, and when Franklin saw them he stopped, spoke to the Corsican, and watched approvingly as one of the pots was placed in the middle of the street. Then, as sailors guf-

fawed, he showed them what he would look like sitting on his own crockery. There was much cheering, and within two days the story had reached most of the western ports.

In his large meetings he never seemed serious, but he always was. He conveyed only one message: The United States shall prevail. And before he had been on the seacoast a week he began convincing those sturdy merchants that it was in their interest to back the fledgling country, not because the United States was relying upon philosophical principles derived from France, and not because there was an inherent brotherhood between the two countries, but because by doing so, the French could gig the English and at the same time earn a batch of livres tournois.

For two months Franklin and Steed worked together, and after Turlock (Steed's captain) had brought the *Whisper* back to Nantes and the time came for parting, the older man said, 'Simon, your help has been invaluable.'

Steed, aware that he had supported Franklin only half-heartedly, since he did not believe in an ultimate American victory, mumbled, 'I accomplished nothing. It was you they wanted to hear.'

'I was the clown, attracting their attention. It was imperative that you be there to represent the other side of our effort.' He laughed, then chucked Steed under the chin as if he were a boy. 'You were the respectable element, and believe me, Steed, the French businessman hungers for respectability. They never deal with banks that are on the verge.'

Then he became serious. With a firm hand he pulled Steed around until they were facing. 'When we started our work you didn't believe we could win. I could see it. Do you believe now?'

'I'm confused. It seems to me we should stay with England.'

Franklin did not protest. 'Let's go to your schooner,' he suggested, and when they sat in Captain Turlock's cabin he said forcefully, 'Simon, we're destined to win. I know our armies are in retreat everywhere and we've no navy. But the great sweep of human desire fights on our side, and we cannot be defeated.' He pointed out the cabin door and said, 'Look at him. The new American.' And there stood Captain Turlock, barefooted, grimy from working on his ship, clothed in near rags, but ready to storm his way into Bristol port if asked. 'Why did you choose him for your captain?' Franklin asked.

'Because he knows...he knows what a ship can do.'

'General Washington chose you to come here because you know. You know what a plantation can do. Now open your eyes, son, and see what a collection of men like you and Captain Turlock can accomplish.' He rose in a state of euphoria and orated as if he were trying to persuade the merchants of Nantes: 'We can remake the world. Simon, we're going to win.' And from that moment in Nantes harbor, Simon Steed never doubted; he cast aside his cautious love for England, his romantic longing for the old securities, and leaped into the full tide of the revolution.

As a result of what he and Franklin achieved in the next week, the solid business community of the French coast awakened to the probability that the United States might indeed win their war of attrition and become a major commercial center. Opposition to French involvement in what had hitherto been regarded as merely another idealistic uprising diminished, and the way was paved for the vigorous participation of that remarkable trio of French military geniuses who would join Lafayette in helping the United States maintain its independence: Rochambeau, Bogainville and, above all, De Grasse.

When the time came for Steed to sail back to Devon, Franklin confided, 'I've written to the Congress suggesting that you be named agent for the southern states.'

'For what?'

'For the acquisition of supplies.'

'I don't understand.'

'Ships. Men like Captain Turlock. Scatter them over the face of the ocean. Bring in muskets and powder and chain and cloth for uniforms. Steed, an army survives on things...like chickens and brass cannon. Get those things.'

Simon Steed was the kind of man to whom such a specific suggestion was a command, and on the spur of the moment he asked Franklin, 'What should I take back now?' and he was astonished at the reply: 'Nothing. Leave Nantes with empty holds.'

'Such a waste...'

'Speed to St. Eustatius.'

'That tiny island?'

'Tiny but powerful. It's owned by the Dutch, and we've been assembling there a body of munitions you'd not believe.'

'What do we use for money?'

'Credit. Your credit.'

'Seems very risky.'

'We're engaged in a risk so grave it terrifies me. Your risk comes at St. Eustatius.'

So they parted, each man engaged in a gamble of staggering dimension: to fail meant ruin and death at the hangman's trap; to win meant the establishment of a nation founded on new principles whose possibilities were only dimly understood. In the hostile port of Nantes, where no man believed America could survive, Simon Steed had convinced himself of those new principles, and to them he was willing to dedicate his fortune and his life.

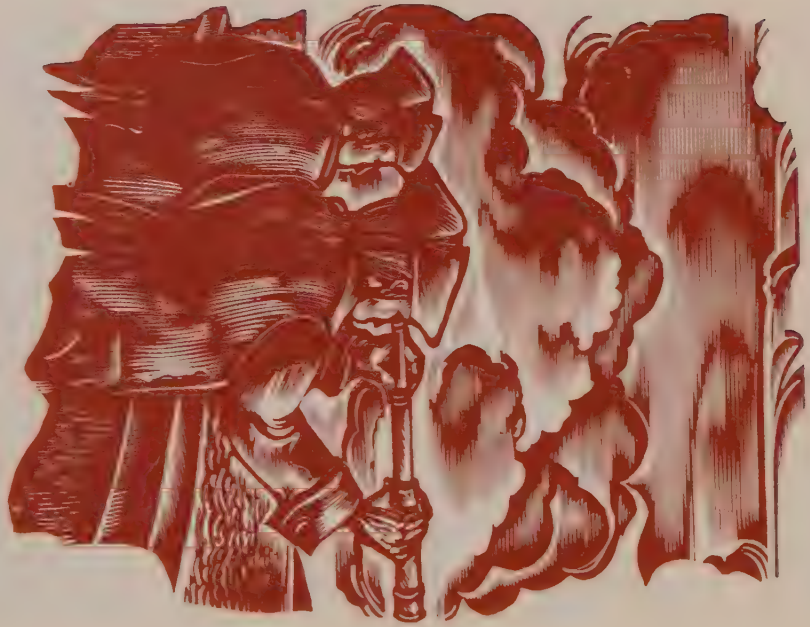
'We'll sail tonight,' he told Captain Turlock.

'Empty?'

'Yes. To St. Eustatius.'

'Never been there,' Turlock said, but he was ready to go.

That any mariner could find St. Eustatius was a miracle, but a greater miracle awaited him when he did find it. For it was one of the smallest islands on earth, a volcanic, rocky pinpoint lost in a cluster of islands north of Guadeloupe. Captain Turlock, seeking it through a bank of clouds, had almost decided it did not exist, when his son cried, 'Cap'm, land to starboard,' and there, emerging



from the sea like a mysterious sentinel, rose the jagged shores of St. Eustatius.

As the *Whisper* maneuvered to enter the minute harbor Simon Steed was overwhelmed by what he saw: a shoreline crowded with great warehouses; so much cordage and cotton that bales were left standing uncovered; no police, no soldiers, no naval guns protecting the place; and in the cramped waters between the headlands not less then sixty vessels. He found out that five or six heavily laden ships put into port daily bringing goods from Europe and Africa, while an equal number left carrying those goods to the embattled American colonies. As one British admiral, furious at the insolence of the place, complained, 'It's the richest small island that ever was on earth.'

It existed in a fairy-tale atmosphere; it was owned by the Dutch, who were at war with nobody, but the goods coming to it were dispatched by merchants of all nations: Russia, Sweden, Portugal and, especially, France and England. This last was particularly aggravating to the British: English chandlers who refused to supply English warships in Plymouth surreptitiously consigned their best goods to St. Eustatius, where they were sold to American vessels fighting England. Also, many a stout merchantman sailing from London with papers for Italy or Greece changed course dramatically south of the Channel and hied off to St. Eustatius, where profits were trebled.

Captain Turlock could not tie up to any dock; thirty vessels were ahead of him. But from his anchorage he rowed ashore to purchase the mate-

rials of war needed along the Chesapeake: the strongest English cordage, double-thick French brassware, muskets from Austria and salt from Poland. He bought wisely, from a score of different merchants speaking many different languages, and when the bills were totaled he had Mr. Steed issue letters of credit. With the *Whisper* loaded as heavily as its timbers would allow, he hoisted anchor and set out for America, having no idea of how he would penetrate the English blockade or what port he would put in to if he succeeded.

It was a bright, sunny run before the wind, but it ended abruptly, for a major English squadron patrolled the Chesapeake and not even a canny dissembler like Turlock could slip through. He sailed north toward Boston, but was intercepted by an American frigate, a pitiful affair with untrained crew and few guns, whose captain cried on speaking-trumpet, 'Turn back! You can't get into Boston.' So the *Whisper* and its priceless cargo drifted south, hoping to land somewhere in the Carolinas, but they, too, were rimmed by English warships, and at a meeting of desperation Turlock told his owner, 'Mr. Steed, the best we can do is beach her somewhere in the Delaware Counties. Carry the goods overland.'

So the *Whisper* moved cautiously north, well out to sea where the Chesapeake squadron would not detect her, and when the latitude of Lewes on the Delaware coast was reached, she turned abruptly west and sped toward shore. There, at the mouth of a small stream, she dropped anchor, boats were lowered and unloading began. Before the first

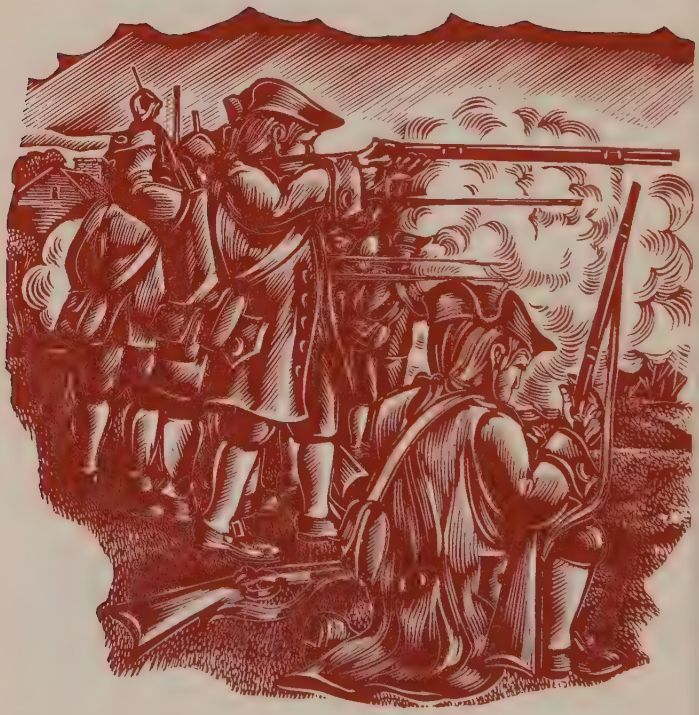
cargo was got ashore men from the Delaware Counties appeared and parties were organized to portage these crucial military supplies across the peninsula to the eastern shores of the Chesapeake, from which they would be ferried to Baltimore.

'You will be paid,' Steed promised the Delaware men.

'Pay or no, we'll get to Baltimore.' They were men who had been fighting the English for three long years; victory seemed farther away than ever but surrender was a word they did not use.

When the schooner was emptied, Steed told his captain, 'Go back to St. Eustatius. Make as many voyages as possible.' And thus the golden ferry between the Dutch entrepôt and the colonies began.

Charles V. Morris



Washington's Plight

It is not very well known that from the first shot of the American Revolution at Lexington, Mass., in April 1775, to March 1776, eleven months later, the colonies were so ridiculously short of gunpowder that anyone could have been tempted to judge the soldiers a bunch of idiots to have challenged the British Army.

General Washington took extreme pains to make sure the British didn't discover his powder shortage. At one point in August 1775, had the British launched an attack on Washington's forces outside Boston, the Continental Army would have been out of ammunition after firing only nine rounds. If intense fire were called for by all hands, the Continentals could have lasted two minutes.

Masterful wartime propaganda by Washington concealed the truth while frantic scrounging for powder got him out of that hole. But shortages continued until the lowest point was reached on Jan. 10, 1776. On that day, General Howe could have won the war by launching an attack, for the Colonial army surrounding Boston didn't have a single pound of powder remaining in its magazines!

After that, supply conditions improved. For the rest of the war, hundreds of tons of powder

arrived, while muskets, cannon, bullets and cannonballs rolled in to keep a 30,000-man army going. By March 1776, Washington had enough ammo to tighten the noose around Boston. Under cover of a massive artillery barrage, Continental forces fortified Dorchester Heights, and on March 17, the British pulled out.

The tale of how the colonies got their munitions when they couldn't make it themselves is almost as interesting as is the tale of how they weathered the days when they couldn't have fired back if fired upon.

When Washington first took over command outside of Boston in July 1775, he was told that his forces had 308 barrels of powder, barely enough for emergencies. On August 3, he called his officers together to decide if the siege of Boston could be continued, or if the army should withdraw to the countryside. He called for a routine report on available powder and was told that in all the American forces they had available to them only 90 barrels (good for nine rounds by the whole army). This was 218 barrels less than the meagre supply Washington thought he had. It turned out that 308 barrels was all the army had *ever* had, and most of it had been used in the Battle of Bunker Hill, back on June 17.

"In moments of great shock," Washington biographer James Thomas Flexner writes, "Washington was inclined to recede into a deep silence. On hearing the truth about the powder, he did not utter a word for half an hour."

The staff meeting that followed showed as

much guts as any other act of the Revolution. It was voted to continue the siege, to try to deceive the British, and pull as many strings as possible to hustle up some more powder.

First, Washington leaked word to the British that he had 1,800 barrels of powder. He spread word among his men that he was embarrassed at having so much more powder in camp than he needed. Great amounts of that stuff could be dangerous. Don't you men be careless around these huge munitions dumps. But he ordered all random firing to cease (there was plenty of it) because it drew "the ridicule of the enemy."

He then rushed off messages to Congress and every colony asking for powder because he expected an enemy bombardment and "wanted to reply to it."

He told Congress the truth, and got an answer from Richard Henry Lee that 109 barrels were on the way and an equal amount would be sent soon. This was too little for a serious battle, but it allowed him to keep up token rounds of answers to occasional British cannon firings, for the sake of credibility. Meanwhile, his troops, to whom he dared not tell the actual truth, kept shooting at geese, and firing to clean their guns—which probably helped credibility however much it depleted the powder supply.

During the siege in 1775, Congress scraped up, all told, about 700 barrels of powder, while Washington gazed out at the British ships coming and going in Boston Harbor, bringing in all needed military supplies. His own supplies arrived by the wagonload, yet for five months he had to keep up some semblance of a besieging force by firing at the enemy.

As early as August 24, he had wangled permission from Congress to hire colonial merchant ship captains to try to capture some of those British supply ships. The first two that put to sea went off on a war of their own, sacking Prince Edward Island, seizing merchant ships with no valuable cargoes and avoiding British military supply ships like the plague. Washington fired the captains in disgust.

But in November, two better captains had some timely successes. Captain William Coit captured a ship with badly needed food and clothes for Washington's army, while Capt. John Manley took the *Nancy* right out from under the noses of the British fleet in Boston Harbor with a handsome cargo of guns and ammunition.

That was about the best Washington's private navy could do. Congress authorized a national Navy in October, but it was well into 1776 before its first task force went after some gunpowder, and its first effort was nothing to brag about.

On Christmas day, 1775, Washington wrote to Congress that "our want of powder is inconceivable."

But his bluff had worked, and was still working when his supply of ammunition was depleted on

January 10, 1776. The British, still shuddering over their losses at Bunker Hill, never once launched an attack. January 10, marked the low point in General Washington's supply situation.

Our story now changes directions. Beginning early in 1776, the Continental Army began to receive guns and powder in ever increasing amounts and kept on getting all it needed for five and a half years. There were horrible shortages in other things—even pay for the troops. At Valley Forge, the clothing shortage was ghastly in mid-winter. But Washington's powder magazines were never bare again, and they were often provided with powder that was superior to that of the British.

On the surface, this seems to be a most unusual condition. The colonies could not make their own munitions. They had to come from Europe. Yet—as early as Nov. 20, 1775—England had clamped a blockade on the American Atlantic coast.

FRANKLIN TO THE FORE

Ben Franklin had a devious hand in the gunpowder game. At least as far back as 1773, Franklin—then representing colonial interests in London—realized that the trouble between the colonies and Britain might turn into war. He also realized that if war came, his American homeland would be at a severe disadvantage in the matter of powder and arms.

Franklin had a remarkable network of influential acquaintances and a communications system immune to British prying. He was friendly with the Crommelins of Amsterdam, in Holland; the Montaudoins of Nantes, in France; Diego Gardoqui of Bilbao, in Spain; Jacques Barbeu-Doubourg of Paris, and most of Europe's other great merchants and shippers.

His prewar communications network included many American sea captains who called on him in London. They were willing and able to deliver verbal messages to whomever Franklin might designate.

As the colonies grew more and more mutinous, the British increased their surveillance of Dr. Franklin. It was a dangerous time for him.

Yet today, most historians believe there is conclusive—if circumstantial—evidence that in his last years in London, Franklin set up an extensive gunrunning network to arm the colonies, in which merchants and shippers from every major European country participated, though not a single letter in Franklin's own hand exists to confirm this.

In 1774, Europeans started sending munitions to the colonies, the Americans making arrangements to receive it and sneak it past the British. There is a close connection between these shipments and the movements of Franklin's sea captain messenger service.

When Franklin arrived home on May 5, 1775, several weeks after the shooting began, he fired off a stream of letters to his European contacts, informing them of American needs, directing them to consult with friendly governments, suggesting by what route the supplies might be most safely shipped, discussing payment, etc.

The machinery for his munitions smuggling was set up too promptly to believe that it was not well under way before the first volley of the Revolution was fired at Lexington in April 1775. While Washington was pining for powder that fall, huge amounts of it were already piled up on the little Dutch island of Statia (St. Eustatius) in the West Indies. Statia was the source of most of the powder Congress had been able to raise in 1775, and a key source of the subsequent larger flow.

Statia is a tiny little speck of rock in the

Caribbean, which the Dutch had turned into a swashbuckling free port. It bulged with warehouses, and thronged with merchants out to make a killing. Its waters were busy with ships coming and going. It was, both literally and figuratively, an island of free trade in a sea of British regulation—a trading and transshipment station for business, fair or foul. Honest traders made deals there free of annoying rules. Bloodthirsty pirates sold their loot on Statia. There, though British men-of-war inspected anyone's ships on the high seas, even gunpowder could be shipped. If a ship's papers were in order, Britain risked war with Holland, France or Spain should she molest their ships if they were en route to Statia and not running the American blockade. In 1775 and later, Statia became a huge ammunition dump. Merchants from the Continent ran honest cargoes of arms and explosives there for the noblest of all mercantile motives—profit. They sold it on Statia directly to agents of the Continental Congress, or to other merchants who would sell it to the agents, or to smugglers who were willing to run it to the colonies and sell it there.

Influential Mr. Franklin saw to it that their own governments did not object to these merchants' honest business in a Dutch port. He advised Congress to pay whatever price demanded, and he joined other colonial leaders in seeking foreign loans to help pay such prices.

Nor was all the business in hard-to-get cash. Statia had long been a trading port for American

tobacco, and now tobacco was traded there for powder and arms.

The European nations were already only too glad to help twist the English Lion's tail in anything short of outright war. When it came to getting the powder as far as Statia, all Britain could do was complain.

If others underrated the power of the profit motive, Mr. Franklin did not. However immoral the Statia trade was in British eyes, there was nothing illegal about it.

Under this legal cloak, a fair amount of munitions arriving in Statia originated with *British* merchants and shippers. It was a Dutch port, wasn't it? It was good business, wasn't it? In fact, the French historian, Henri Doniol, who specialized in France's role in our Revolution, wrote that Dr. Franklin even persuaded British merchants who had qualms about selling arms to the enemy to join in the trade.

Sometimes, these merchants seemed almost contemptuous of British authority. Late in 1780, Admiral Hood, convoying a flock of English merchantmen to the Caribbean, awoke to find that 12 ships of the convoy had disappeared during the night. He didn't know whether they'd been lost, stolen or had strayed.

The mystery was solved about a month later, when the ships under Hood anchored off Statia. There were the British ships, transferring their cargoes to American bottoms, according to John F. Jameson, writing in the American Historical Review. There was a scandal in England when

someone leaked news of this development to the public.

The British government forbade the exports of arms as early as Oct. 1, 1774, but that order was little more than a nuisance to British smugglers. A few greased palms, phony inventories, false destination papers and British ships carrying gunpowder for General Washington were on their way to "neutral" ports in Europe or the Caribbean, to Nova Scotia or even the American coast. Even American vessels, flying neutral flags and carrying false papers, ran powder from Europe to Statia.

On Statia, and to a lesser degree on other nearby islands owned by Spain, Denmark and France, most of the ammo was bought by American agents. They sent it to the United States on fast, sleek Bermuda sloops (sold to the Americans illegally).

Some came via "powder cruises," officially sponsored by Congress or the various states. The Massachusetts Board of War, for instance, had 32 "trading vessels," most of them bearing French names, collecting gun-powder not only in the Caribbean but also at Nantes, France; Bilboa, Spain, and other European ports. South Carolina, Maryland, Connecticut, Virginia and Pennsylvania also sponsored powder cruises.

Despite frantic British efforts to intercept them, the large majority of these vessels evaded capture, through superior knowledge of American waters, outstanding seamanship, faster-sailing vessels and native wit.

Once the gunrunning ships were within sight of the American coast, their small size became an important advantage. They usually sailed through Ocracoke Inlet—a passage through the sandbar that separates Pamlico and Albemarle Sounds from the Atlantic off North Carolina—then up

various rivers and creeks, out of reach of big British cruisers.

From there, the munitions were shipped north by wagon, or by water from Albemarle Sound, up the Chowan River, to the South Quay in southern Virginia, then by land to Suffolk, by ferry across

the James, York and Potomac Rivers, by boat again from Bladensburgh, Md., to Chesapeake Bay, and from there by wagon to where it was needed.

No one knows today exactly how much gun-powder and other munitions reached Washington via this dangerous, circuitous, clandestine route, but it was a considerable amount—enough to enable the Continental Army to oust the British from Boston, to fight vigorously in the vain defense of Long Island, New York and northern New Jersey, and to give Washington some confidence that he could at least put up a good battle.

The British knew quite well what Statia meant to the American war effort. "This rock of only six miles in length and three in breadth has done England more harm than all the arms of her most potent enemies. Alone it has supported the infamous American rebellion," said Admiral Rodney, commander of the British Navy's Leeward Island fleet in 1780.

Actually, Rodney was exaggerating. America got even more gun-powder from other clandestine sources. But without Statia especially in the early stages of the war, Washington and his army could not have survived.

On Sept. 18, 1775, Congress appointed Franklin, Silas Deane, Robert Morris and others to a Secret Committee of Correspondence, to put munitions procurement on a more regular basis. The Secret Committee was staffed by America's shrewdest, most experienced merchants and given considerable power and money.

It took over the Statia munitions trade, assumed control of Franklin's gunrunning network, and expanded its operations. In the end, the Secret Committee became a massive import-export agency, its operations reaching throughout the Western world. Little is known for certain about its precise deeds, because the Committee destroyed its records. But the steady flow of war supplies to George Washington and his men beginning only months after the Committee was established, and running for the duration of the war, gives solid evidence that this branch of Congress did its work well.

One Secret Committee member, wealthy Robert Morris, had been a leading Philadelphia international trader for 20 years. He and his agents bought up most of the tobacco that Congress intended to sell in exchange for gunpowder. His agents in the Caribbean bought up the gunpowder and sold it to Congress. Morris made large personal profits in the bargain.

Morris' presence on the Secret Committee was invaluable to the country. His acquaintances, his knowledge, his abilities perfectly supplemented Franklin's. His profits helped him become a major financier of the Revolution. When the credit of Congress collapsed in 1781, Morris assumed its financial direction—and among other things bought all army supplies on his personal credit.

After more than five years of war, the British could abide Statia no longer. On Feb. 3, 1781, Admirals Rodney and Hood seized control of the island. (By that time, England was at war with

most of Europe.) Rodney and Hood captured more than three million pounds worth of contraband, mostly munitions. They sent it home in 24 cargo ships, most of which were recaptured by French and American privateers and sent back to America.

If any single man was more responsible than the good Dr. Franklin for getting General Washington his gunpowder, it was Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, the French playwright who wrote *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville.*

About 1774 (still in peacetime), Beaumarchais became a French spy in London. His task: to discover England's plans in regard to France, sample English public opinion and inform the Comte de Vergennes (France's Foreign Minister) and King Louis XVI.

In the course of his work, Beaumarchais met many Americans, most of them also friends of Franklin, and he became converted to the American cause.

Even before the war, he'd begun to scout around for arms to send to America. Like Franklin, he had also urged European merchants to become gunrunners.

But Beaumarchais had bigger things in mind. Beginning in the summer of 1775, he devoted almost all of his energies to helping America. His most important ally was M. Vergennes. The French Foreign Minister also wanted to aid the patriots, mostly because he could imagine no better way to damage England.

Vergennes allowed French merchants every

sort of illicit trade with the Americans in French ports. He even subsidized some. But he did this so indirectly that even the all-knowing British Embassy in Paris only guessed at the truth.

For his part, Beaumarchais continued his contacts with foreign gun-runners and worked to persuade the French King of the value of the American rebellion to French interests. On Sept. 21, 1775, he wrote Louis XVI that the Americans had a great army and would be invincible in battle. The King was impressed. But he was not convinced, so Beaumarchais and Vergennes dispatched a French agent, Archard de Bonvouloir, to study America first-hand.

In December 1775, Bonvouloir showed up at Franklin's house in Philadelphia. He represented himself as a merchant from Antwerp with powerful friends in France. But Franklin's nose smelled the truth. He brought Bonvouloir to a meeting of the Secret Committee and proceeded to tell the Frenchman that the entire country was behind the war, that Washington's army was growing, that the war was going splendidly.

None of this was true, but Franklin knew it was what his visitor wanted to hear. Even some members of the Committee were then doubtful about independence. And almost as they met, Washington was using the last of his gunpowder and many of his soldiers were deserting.

On Feb. 27, 1776, Bonvouloir's favorable report reached Vergennes and Beaumarchais. They were delighted with it and sent it to the King immediately.

Meanwhile, Vergennes had ordered one of France's best artillery officers to survey French arsenals and select huge amounts of armament for eventual shipment to America. He also ordered Antoine Lavoisier's munitions works to go into full production. His gunpowder was considered the best ever made.

Beaumarchais, meanwhile, had been devising a brilliant, complicated scheme to see that America received these munitions, a plan worthy of a master playwright. On February 29, he revealed his plan in a memo to the King. The first part of his memo warned that if the colonies and England made up, France was sure to lose its Caribbean sugar islands, and Spain both its islands and its mainland territory.

"What shall we do in this extremity to win peace and save our islands? Sire, the only means is to give help to the Americans. . . . If it is replied that we cannot aid the Americans without drawing a storm upon us, I reply that this danger can be averted if we aid the Americans secretly."

Then, in the second part of his memo, Beaumarchais described his plan. He would set up a dummy trading company called Roderique Hortalez and Company, with himself at the head. Initial funds would come from Louis XVI and Charles III, the Spanish king.

With this money, Beaumarchais would buy powder, arms and uniforms from French stocks and send them to America, in return for Virginia tobacco—which could be sold for such high prices, he said, that both kings would make a tidy

profit. (As it turned out, both suffered personal losses.)

On May 2, six weeks after the British evacuated Boston and while Washington was fortifying New York, the two kings okayed the playwright's scheme, each throwing a million livres—a considerable fortune—into the pot. Eventually, French merchants—who stood to make the real money—added nearly three million livres more and Louis XVI came up with still another million.

About that time, Louis XVI commanded that his navy be rebuilt and his army reequipped. By the stroke of his pen, he therefore turned their old arms and supplies into cheap government surplus for sale to the Continental Army.

Beaumarchais promptly went into business with a vengeance. He wrote a letter to the Secret Committee, introducing himself, and said, "I have procured for you about 200 pieces of brass cannon, 200,000 pounds of cannon powder, 20,000 excellent fusils, some brass mortars, bombs, cannon balls, bayonets, clothes, etc. . . .

While Beaumarchais was getting his Hortalez Company under way, the Secret Committee, completely unaware of his activities, was dispatching Silas Deane to Paris, to increase the flow of illicit arms to the new nation and to enlist French aid on whatever level possible. Using Franklin's contacts, Deane soon met Beaumarchais. Before long, they were working hand-in-glove to provide America's needs, via the Hortalez dummy corporation.

But outfitting and loading ships to take

munitions to America seemed to take forever. And every time a ship was ready, the British (whose spies knew all) pressured Vergennes to keep it in port. Behind their threats: the possibility of war.

Vergennes, a smooth operator, always complied, at least until the heat was off. Sometimes, such as in the summer and fall of 1777, when the British were retaking Ticonderoga and capturing Philadelphia, he delayed Hortalez shipments even longer, to be sure the American cause was still alive.

Finally, by fits and starts, a generous flow of powder, arms, uniforms, etc., began moving across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, consigned to Hortalez at Martinique, at Cap Francois (in present-day Haiti) and at Statia. American agents received these cargoes and sent them northward, sometimes in the same ships.

In April 1777, the first Hortalez-chartered vessels arrived in Portsmouth, N.H.—the *Mercure* and the *Amphitrite.* They provided Washington with a large supply of gunpowder, 60 cannons, 12,000 muskets and much clothing.

In all, seven of the eight large ships Beaumarchais chartered delivered their cargo safely. And the eighth managed to offload part of her supplies at Martinique before she was captured.

According to Bruce Lancaster, in the American Heritage Book of the Revolution, 80% of America's gunpowder during the critical years of 1777 and 1778 came from Hortalez and Company. Without it, Gates would never have beaten

Burgoyne at Saratoga on Oct. 17, 1777, and America would have lost one of her most significant triumphs.

Nonetheless, the Hortalez shipments were only a one-shot, stopgap solution to Washington's munitions problems. They might have sufficed had the war ended in 1778. But the war went on. A permanent, continuing supply of arms was needed. Once more, it was Benjamin Franklin who took the major role.

When Congress first heard about Hortalez and Company, it felt France might be ripe for a treaty of trade and friendship. So, in October 1776, it appointed Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane and Arthur Lee to diplomatic posts in France.

Deane was already there, of course, aiding Beaumarchais. Lee was also in Europe. Franklin arrived in Paris in early December and set to work on the project almost at once. He wanted nothing less than to bring France into the war.

It took him a little over a year of adroit manipulation to carry it off.

On Jan. 8, 1778, France and the United States signed a military alliance. From that moment on, French arms flowed freely into the United States, officially and in greater quantity than ever before—supported now by a fully belligerent French navy. Once and for all, Franklin had solved Washington's gunpowder problem.

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